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# The World; The Arena of Civilization

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# Two Poems

JON DAVIS

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## The World

"It's a world full of people  
waiting for you to fuck up."  
My father said that in 1959,  
twisting the throttle, one  
hand on the suicide shift.  
When the phone rang in the kitchen,  
my mother's voice was like water  
spinning down the drain. We drove  
to a warehouse where men in white  
worked all night to deliver him  
to death, but he did not die.  
He became a voice, a wind that  
blows through my calm thoughts,  
telling me again that the world  
waits for you to fuck up,  
to splatter yourself against  
a bridge or ride over a guardrail  
on a mountain road. They'll watch.  
They'll pick you up, scrape you up,  
load you into a white van.  
They'll turn on their lights  
as if this were something  
to celebrate. They'll make a party  
of your demise. They'll run  
a photo of your mangled legs,  
the half that's left of the motorcycle  
that got you there. They'll welcome you  
to their heaven of statistics,  
talk to your wife on the news.  
Some two-bit cop or official

will come on all slicked-up  
to tell how stupid you were  
to ride without a helmet, as if  
the small amount of living we do  
in that dark place we call the brain  
was something worth protecting.  
Listen to what I'm saying.  
I come home from eight hours  
of picking things up and putting them  
back down. I don't go home  
to read Russian novels. I don't  
play chess with the wife. I ride  
to the tavern and drink shots and beers;  
I take my bike out on Route Eight,  
crack that throttle so wide  
my wrist aches. There's something  
about speed. It's as if you could  
catch up with time, like  
if you went fast enough  
you couldn't be caught,  
couldn't be *seen*. Last night,  
past midnight, I felt the tires  
flatten against pavement, heard  
that silence when everything begins  
to glitter, cleansed of sound, cleansed  
of the crank and thrust of words  
that keep telling it in your ear—  
there are limits to what you can do,  
as if your body would flake into light,  
as if you'd dissolve in the wind,  
string out behind like the rap  
of the engine, as if your eyes  
would press back in your heads and see  
pain, something pure, more real than this  
city of excuses we ride through.

# The Arena of Civilization

after Mark Tobey

In Tobey's "Arena of Civilization,"  
men and women lounge and work  
in a four-tier building beneath a dome  
already invaded by chaos—lines  
etched by the imagination or god,  
lines like birds scattering,  
fever thoughts, the word repeated  
and repeated until emptied of meaning.

In every room of our lives  
a man or woman languishes, or several  
conspire around a small table.  
New plans for raising the dome?  
The hieroglyphs of purpose remain  
indecipherable. Without a god or  
some final goal, what is human striving?

Are these the four tiers  
of the brain? Civilization the dream,  
the form that follows man? Or are these  
great men and women not lounging  
or conspiring, but sharing wine,  
comforting each other while the dome  
collapses and chaos rushes in?

There is no telling. The petals  
of our thoughts unfold, but  
in that scarlet, no answer.

In the falcon's stoop or the merest sigh,  
no balm. Our lives are a web  
of small purposes, the stunned rhetoric  
of business: "fast bucks,"  
"futures," "investments."

Today I envied Milton his god,  
the sure touch of his line, the pure  
righteousness of each syllable  
creeping heavenward. Or John Donne  
in his colloquie, his thought  
"immediate as the odor of a rose."

In Tobey's "Arena of Civilization"  
we live in a small, public building  
like clerks unmoved by the brimstone sky.

Think of Monet, his bourgeois weekends,  
boats drawn to the dock, fattened by shadow,  
young lovers gazing out  
as they had to at the waters,  
currents of thin color  
pooling in the shade of willows.

Is such intelligence a happy accident?

Is this the pleasure of death, of life  
ending in the pastel present?

Does civilization rise defiant  
towards the shock of whatever hovers

Platonic behind the sky? Or downward,  
trenched deeper against whatever may be true?

I think of Millet's

weed pullers, how each peasant  
was pure, some focused swatch of sadness  
oblivious under the pale sky. How  
as a woman leaned to earth  
she knew nothing but the single gesture  
required. Required, as a chant  
requires a gesture of voice—a falling

in pitch that is neither note nor breath—  
to end. As the guitar loses its notes  
in its own black throat; as a thrush  
will swallow its song until  
it seems the bird is made of sound.

Like a carpenter who is a poet,  
who is a poet before he is a man,  
as if he could speak himself alive.  
"Man dwells poetically," wrote Hölderlin,  
and Heidegger agreed, who could breathe  
not a note from his tired lungs.

Like my brother, seven years gone,  
who had no purpose but mine:  
to achieve some small perfection—  
the shift from third to fourth,

the front wheel lifted; the exact taunt  
to quicken a room into life;  
or the switchback leaned to the edge of traction,  
the kickstand sparking like a meteor.  
No god. Perhaps. Or, if so, a god  
who understands wonder, who leans  
each corner with us, marvelling  
at the sudden grace of his creations, how  
even he was not expecting such beauty:  
porpoises curving silver from the waves,  
the gymnast whirling over the pommels,  
the artist taking a knife to the canvas  
to carve an ochre room, a man standing  
calmly at its edge while a colorful,  
abstract violence batters through the outside walls.